

JoAnne Giambalvo - An Autobiography - The Early Years  
Edited by John Stayton  
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Looking back on my life, I really can't say that I have any regrets; I'd probably do the same things again. Even if one little event had happened to alter the course of things, I firmly believe I would still be where I am today, still the same person I am today. I believe things happen in life just the way they are supposed to happen - it's our destiny. So when I hear people say "If I had my life to live over..." I laugh to myself.

My grandfather sent his oldest son Peter Giambalvo to America. He was the only one in the family that managed to get an education and was a practicing attorney. The plan was for him to get established and start sending money home to my grandfather in Sicily so the rest of the family could also come to the "promised land". Giovanni, (John) my dad, was the second to arrive at Ellis Island in 1918, but unlike Peter, he could not read or write English. His brother Benny and younger sister Frances waited their turns and came afterwards. His mother, my grandmother, came over some years later but passed away shortly after. My grandfather never made it out of Sicily.

Dad, not having any skills or proper language to get a decent job, started working for the Mafia. His job was to "strong arm" for his bosses, and the money was good, good enough to help Peter send for the rest of the family in Sicily. Later on Dad got a job in Zimmets bed spring factory but continued to work on and off for the Mafia. The ties couldn't be severed for the rest of his life - he owed them.



Giovanni Giambalvo

My mother's parents came from Trieste, an inlet off the Gulf of Venice. My mother Nina was 8 months old when they came to America and settled on Mulberry Street in Brooklyn. She was the first born of nine children that were to follow in rapid succession, so she had a lot of responsibility placed on her as a child. It's no wonder she wasn't thrilled when her own children were born. Her father, my maternal grandfather, Camillo Licata, was a kindly old man who kept to himself most of the time. He worked on a fishing boat and he would catch fish and sell them on his pushcart up and down the streets. He supplied the family with all kinds of sea food like octopus and squid and eels

which kept them going in those first early lean years, and later on during the big Depression.



Nina Licata

Camillo tried early in his marriage to be the head of the family but gave in because his wife, Carmela Tadesco, was a strong-willed person. She also had a bad temper and would resort to violence when she got angry. Unfortunately most of it was aimed at her children, my aunts and uncles. It wasn't unusual for her to throw a knife at one of her sons when her anger got the better of her. She would knock down her daughters and kick them as they lay on the floor.

My mother's brother John was born right after her. Joe was next, then Sammy the youngest son. Millie was the second daughter, Annie was third. Francis and Dorothy were there soon afterward. I despised all of them. Seems like they were all twisted psychologically, but who can doubt it with a mother like they had. I hated to go to grandma's house because she always had most of them around. They were coarse people, loud and boisterous, taken to wild arm gesturing and taking pleasure in hurting one another emotionally and physically.

My journey through life started on Mothers day in the year of 1935. I was the third daughter born. I was frail, blond haired and hazel eyed, rare for an Italian, but they said I took after my paternal grandmother whose roots went back to Sweden. My father was hoping for a boy when I was born, especially since the boy born before me was stillborn. Nina, my mother, would rather have had a Maytag than another child, with two other daughters RoseMarie and Gloria to raise. Nevertheless, I had arrived and they couldn't send me back.

In my early years I remember listening when my Dad's cronies came over to visit. They would put a pot of coffee on the stove and huddle around the kitchen table and speak in whispers. He would chase us out but I always hid in the next room and listened to them. I heard them planning many times how they would "take care" of employers that didn't want to join their "Union". Nothing was sacred with them, breaking legs and arms and the occasional hit and run was used. I found all this intriguing and exciting, probably because I wasn't supposed to be listening.

We lived in Brooklyn, New York, at 1510 Dekalb Avenue between Knickerbocker Avenue and Irving Avenue. It was a four room, cold water, roach-infested railroad apartment. On the corner of Irving Avenue there was a Robert Hall Clothing store and across from it an Italian bread store, where the smell of fresh baked bread lingered in the air giving you a warm feeling when you passed the open cellar door. Max's candy store was next to it and Max was the neighborhood philosopher. I remember my mother saying "Ask Max, he should know" about anything you asked her. Two blocks down on Wilson Avenue was the 83rd Precinct. In those days, the cop on the beat was our friend and we'd run to meet him on his rounds as he stopped to chat with the neighborhood people.

The fondest memories I have of my childhood were of the hot summer nights after the sun set. With the sidewalks still steaming from the heat, the dinner dishes washed and put away, everyone would escape the hot tenements and sit on the steps outside and wait for some cool night breezes. The grown-ups would catch up on the gossip of the day and the kids would play Hide-and-Seek or Potsy or Tag. Our neighbor Flo and her husband would walk up to the corner bar every night with their tin to get some beer on tap, and on the way home, she'd buy a vanilla Meloroll. If they didn't take that stroll every night, we knew something was definitely wrong. The trolley cars would roll by to break the silence every half hour or so. We'd put our Spaldings on the tracks and watch as the trolley cars went over them and split them in half. It was fun even though my mother would scream at us to stop because Spaldings were 5 cents and too expensive to waste like that.

On one such calm uneventful summer night our neighbor Irene's husband fell off the roof to his death. It seems he was fixing an antenna on one of the first TV's in the neighborhood when he slipped and fell or so the gossip went. However, everyone knew he found out Irene was messing around with another man, so he jumped to his death in despair rather than face the rejection and humiliation.

On summer days when school was out we hung around in the streets all day. Sometimes grandpa would come and pick us up to visit him and grandma. He would walk ahead of us very slowly because he was ill with the beginning stages of T.B. We would lag behind and hide in store fronts and he would pretend he didn't know where we were and call us. We had a lot of fun thinking we were fooling him and would chant "Nonoo, Nonoo", and he'd pretend he couldn't find us.

I always had a lump in my throat when visiting grandma. She took a dislike to me and would lock me in her pantry when I misbehaved. One day she locked me in as punishment and I methodically knocked down every single thing on the shelves. When she opened the door, sacks of flour, coffee, sugar and salt were dumped on the floor. I had to clean it up as punishment, but it was worth it, because she never locked me in there again.

On some days, when the weather was pleasant, she would let us play in the enclosed yard behind her house. They had a grape arbor which was thick with bitter grapes that they used to make their wine at the end of the year. I would sit in the shade of the arbor and she would periodically look out the window and yell, "Don't eat the grapes Joanzie". The

grapes were too tempting for me to resist, or perhaps it was because she made them a forbidden treat, but I would sit out of her view and gorge myself on them. I knew I would get sick because of it, but it didn't deter me. Fig trees were also abundant back there. It seemed every Italian that came through Ellis Island had a small twig wrapped carefully in burlap to plant in the new country. These little twigs had to be babied and coddled because the winters in New York were so cold. Every winter they went through the same ritual, wrapping little seedlings up in burlap and tarpaulin and tying them securely. In the Spring the unwrapping would take place. The fig trees survived and bloomed. Every Christmas, Grandma would make delicious cookies oozing with figs. I have never been able to find a cookie equal to that, and I expect I never will.

A lot of the time when grandpa took us to their house, he would take us down to his workroom in the cellar where grandma had insisted he work because he made a mess of the house. His hobby was carving boats out of wood and the shavings were all over his workroom. These were the happy times for me. I was fascinated by his handiwork plus the fact that he kept an old trunk stocked with cheese and wine. He would turn on his radio and we would listen to Italian music and munch on cheese and drink wine while he whittled his boats. In retrospect I don't know if the homey, comfortable, close feeling came from grandpa, or the unlimited flow of wine which was available to me.

On special summer days my mother would take us to Coney Island. The subway ride was about an hour long, and with the four of us along, plus two or three neighborhood kids, we'd carry lots of food with us. It wasn't unusual for her to rise early in the morning to cook pasta for us so we could have a hot lunch. She said hot dogs were not healthy to eat. We had to carry a huge potful, plus anything else she thought was a balanced diet. This usually included Italian bread, cheese, pastries, and gallons of milk. We usually stayed on the beach until after dark and then made the long trip home, hot and tired and uncomfortable with sand down our bathing suits, on the BMT Subway. When my father joined us sometimes on a Saturday or Sunday, he treated us to one hot dog each and a root beer from Nathan's. Oh how I looked forward to that. A hot dog was a nickel then and so was a root beer. The subway ride was a nickel also.

I was five and a half years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, plunging us into World War II. I remember my uncles going off to Japan and then Germany. Strange names like Okinawa and Bataan came up in conversations. I also remember when Roosevelt died, and I couldn't understand why my father, who always spoke badly of Roosevelt, suddenly did an about-face and was sorry about it. However, it didn't mean much to me, neither did the war at that tender age. Although it was fun collecting newspapers and tin cans for the war effort, it wasn't fun waiting in line with my mother with ration stamps for scarce items such as coffee and sugar. The war, on the other hand, did have a romantic side for me. My mother started sending us to the movies to get rid of us. For 25 cents I could sit in a movie theater all day, or until my sisters and I were thrown out. I could lose myself easily in the make believe world of the cinema. I would imagine myself as Betty Grable wearing gorgeous costumes, dancing and singing, or I could be Lana Turner waiting for Clark Gable to come home from the war. I sat in the darkened movie houses, long after my sisters went home. It was not unusual for one of

my uncles to come looking for me to take me home. I would sit there watching the same movies over and over again until someone came to fetch me.

I have fond memories of my sisters and I doing our homework on the kitchen floor while Dad sat in his rocking chair in the corner reading his newspaper after dinner. Mom would usually be at the sink doing something or other and always complaining about it. Family life centered around the kitchen because it was the warmest room in the house. Steam heat was non-existent in those old tenement buildings. Later on, the landlord installed it, but not until I was about 11 years old.

Radio was our only entertainment outside of the movies. I remember programs like Amos 'N Andy, The Lone Ranger, The Shadow, Suspense, The Green Hornet, and on Sundays, the "Battle of the Baritones" where Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby were on popularity lists that fluctuated from week to week.

We were all required to be at the dinner table at 6 p.m. every night because that was the time my Dad came home. We weren't allowed into the living room where the good furniture was unless company came over. Life changed drastically when television reared its ugly head. My father couldn't afford one so our neighbors upstairs, the Altaro's, invited us into their living room every Tuesday night to watch Uncle Miltie. We wouldn't miss it. When my father finally broke down and bought our first tiny-screened TV, we were allowed for the first time to eat our meals on a tray in that sacred room. That seemed to change our way of life altogether.

My father used to go to Miami, Florida, on vacation every year by himself. He'd bring snapshots home and tell us stories about how wonderful it was. Oranges that could be picked and eaten from your back yard, avocados, orchids growing wild for the picking. It truly sounded like a paradise, I often wondered why he didn't ever take us with him, but I'd never ask him.

I remember when the Japanese surrendered. When the news broke Gloria and I ran around the block three times before we realized that we had our pajamas on. Now all my uncles started to come home from the war. Uncle George was in Italy for three years. Uncle Sammy was in the Philippines. I vaguely remember a distant cousin named Sal. He was in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. When he left he was 6'4" of strapping manhood. When he stepped off the boat, no one knew him. He was hollow-eyed and gaunt. His once husky frame was skeletal. He took to staring off into space a lot and one time I watched in horror as he went through a malaria attack.

Life went on - apartments were so scarce that the G.I.'s had to live in Quonset Huts. They were Government Issue and made of tin and probably as hot as hell, but the G.I.'s endured, they had no choice. There was a lot of talk about the Atom Bomb and in school we had to participate in drills in case of an attack. At night I had nightmares and thought of dying a lot - far too much for such a young child.

I had to go to religious in the Catholic Church every Wednesday at 2 p.m. We were excused from school early so we could attend. I hated that more than anything. I would sit in St. Joseph's church and shiver and shake with fear as the Nuns and Priests walked up and down the aisles making sure we were paying attention. If someone wasn't, they got slapped on their heads with a book, usually the Bible. Father Simonetti was the worst offender. Sometimes when he got close, I could smell the liquor on his breath. I got sick on Wednesdays very often.

We were forced to go to church on Sundays by our parents. I resented that also. We were getting mixed messages here. How come we were lectured by them to go to church or we'd go to hell, but they didn't accompany us? Did that mean they were going to hell or did they have a special dispensation? I promised myself that as soon as I could get away with it, I wouldn't go anymore.

My Aunt Annie and Uncle Sam Gelsomino moved into the building next to ours. Aunt Annie was one of my mother's younger sisters. She couldn't have children like most of my aunts and uncles had. Seems like, the story went, that they had the mumps as children which rendered most of them sterile. Having her next door to us was heaven to me because she showered me with attention. She'd call my sisters and me as we played in the street and throw fruit out of the window for us to catch. Many times we missed and the fruit would splatter on the concrete and we'd all laugh, her included. One time she asked Gloria and I to help her wash her kitchen floor. We went up to her apartment and got down on our hands and knees with her. She decided that it wasn't much fun, so she tied rags around our feet and hers and we soaked them in a bucket of soap and water and proceeded to skate all over her floors. She slipped and fell and we all laughed so hard that our sides hurt.

Aunt Annie would cuddle me in her ample lap and tell me stories. Uncle Sam always told everyone that I was his daughter because my hair was blonde like his. He took me with him on his truck when he worked sometimes, and we would stop at a bar where his cronies were, and he'd brag to them about me. I couldn't imagine why anyone would brag about me! They all believed I was his daughter and I was flattered and went along with the pretense. He was paying attention to me and treating me with love and affection, I felt important. I didn't know it then but Uncle Sam's stops at the bar were very important to him because he was an alcoholic. I didn't mind being in bars, I liked the relaxed atmosphere and the camaraderie the people showed each other. It was here that I had my first taste of beer. The first sip I had, I made a face, it tasted awful, but I drank more because everyone laughed at the face I made. Before I knew it I was feeling dizzy and acting and saying foolish things. Everyone was laughing at me and urging me on. I was the center of attention and I loved it. I never felt this free before, I was floating somewhere, I was comfortable, I belonged, I was happy. I remembered that feeling all too well and in the future I would never remember the sickness that followed. I would just try to recapture the feeling of well-being. When it was time to leave, Uncle Sam helped me into the truck and I stumbled and he laughed. He didn't laugh though when I threw up all over the upholstery.

Every time I got the chance, I would stay with Aunt Annie and Uncle Sam. They would take my sisters and I to the wrestling matches at the Ridgewood Grove, and we always had such fun. The people were strange, and Aunt Annie would yell and scream with them. I remember the night she took me to see "The Blimp". He was a wrestler who was 640 lbs. All he had to do was sit on his opponent to win, and he usually did.

We moved away from DeKalb Avenue. The new apartment, on Stanhope Street between Seneca and Onderdonk Avenue, was a German neighborhood so you can imagine their reaction to us when we moved in. In our old neighborhood, I would call the Irish kids "Micks" and the Puerto Ricans "Spics", not because I had anything against them, but because my father passed his prejudices on to me. Now for the first time in my life I knew how it felt to be on the receiving end. The German kids were calling me Dago, and Whop.

RoseMarie lived in the apartment downstairs with her newly married husband Joe, whose father owned the house. I liked Joe. He had good manners, something which I wasn't accustomed to, and he treated me like an adult. RoseMarie and Joe both worked and hired me to feed their German Shepherd, Freida and their cat Sambo, and also straighten out their apartment. For this, I would get paid five dollars a week which was a lot of money in those days. Added to the two dollars allowance from my mother - I felt rich.

Before her marriage, RoseMarie had been dating a nice guy named Joe Cina who was very much in love with her, but he made the mistake of bringing his friend Joe Janda home one day to meet her. From then on, she dated both of them steadily, with their knowledge. She had great difficulty choosing which one to marry, so she had a conference with Dad and he advised her to marry Joe Janda. The reason being that since he had been a 2nd lieutenant in the Army, he held more promise for the future. I guess Dad's reasoning was sensible, but I always felt that if she was so much in doubt, neither one was the right one.

My parents insisted that Joe get baptized in the Catholic faith before their marriage because he was Protestant. I never could understand why they insisted on this when neither one of them practiced the faith.

Gloria was working now, Camille was still in elementary school, and I started my first year of high school. I had just turned 15.

One particular teacher I took a dislike to was our homeroom teacher, Mr. Schneck. Each time one person misbehaved, he would punish everyone. He liked to hit his students, by walking down the aisles and striking them in the back of the head with a book. I noticed that he took a special delight in hitting the boys more than the girls, especially if the boy was especially timid. One day someone annoyed him and he started down the aisles, methodically hitting everyone as he went along. I was pretty fed up with it. I did nothing to deserve any punishment, and was tired of his bullying treatment. When he got behind my desk and raised the book behind my head, I stood up and said loudly, "If you hit me one more time, I'll take this book and hit you right in your ugly face". I raised my

Webster's Dictionary in the air and faced him nose to nose. He stopped dead in his tracks, turned red, walked past me and hit the person seated in front of me. Whenever he did his punishing from then on he bypassed my desk. I was not very surprised about 5 years later, when I picked up a newspaper and read that he had been arrested for sexually molesting boys in the cloakroom in class. I always knew there was something in the way he got pleasure out of hurting them.

I went to the movies as much as possible; it was still an escape for me - a dream world. But now I also started hanging out in a club with a very bad reputation called "The Amboy Dukes". I went there with a schoolmate one day by chance and felt instantly at home. The Amboy Dukes were involved in a gang rape of a teenage girl at one time and most of the guys that participated in the rape were in the newspapers. They were underage so the penalties weren't too severe, statutory rape they called it.

Girls that made the mistake of getting pregnant in those days bore the responsibility of the pregnancies, they had no choice. Abortions were not legal so the unfortunate girls were forced to go to back-alley abortionists at their risk, or have the babies and give them up for adoption. Many a girl went to a Catholic home for 9 months with an (undiagnosed) illness to recover. The babies were born there, given up for adoption and no one was wiser. I made a vow to myself to remain a virgin. I didn't want the heartache or the misery connected with an unwanted pregnancy.

My sister Gloria and I would go to the club and stay there a few hours. It was innocent enough I thought, no one ever bothered me and I took every opportunity available to be out of the house. There usually was plenty of beer at the club and I could sit and drink in the darkened room and watch the others slow dance. Sometimes a couple would move off into the back room to "make out". I didn't see the back room yet and didn't care to, the beer and the darkness were enough to satisfy my needs.

Gloria and I got along o.k., now that we were in our teens, except that I was jealous of her. She was much more attractive than I with long black hair and blue eyes. She had a nice figure while mine was still under-developed. She was only two years older than I was, but two years can mean a lot at that age. Another "hang out" we shared was the ice cream parlor around the corner from our home. One reason I liked it was that sometimes the motorcycle gang would stop by and try to provoke fights with the regular group there. I loved the guys with the greasy "duck tails" and leather jackets, but my first preference was the club. It was now our "home away from home". Even though I still felt awkward and unsure of myself with everyone, I didn't feel that way with the rebels and drop-outs that hung around the "fringes" of the norm. I had crushes on boys older than I, but they didn't amount to much.

Sometimes Gloria and I dressed up and went to bars even though we were both underage. A black dress and high heels were all we needed to look older. Sometimes on double dates we would challenge our dates by saying "We can drink all of you under the table". They, being "macho", couldn't let that happen. Gloria couldn't drink too much without getting sick, but I could drink huge amounts of whiskey without even feeling the effects.

I needed more and more whiskey now to start feeling good and I never suffered from hangovers. After a while we would go to the ladies room and then sneak out the back leaving our very "tipsy" dates to fend for them selves.

I made a male friend of 17 years of age and he would pick me up and we would go out drinking. He didn't know how old I was and probably would have died if he did, he assumed I was much older. He tried "making out" in his car, but I would never go past the necking stage. I guess he thought I was just playing hard to get and was biding his time until I gave in to his charms. Little did he know that time would never come. He eventually gave up on me and moved on to greener pastures.

I fell in love for the first time with a boy named Roy Hoffman. The attraction for him was the fact that he was one of the first in our group to try marijuana. No one knew the dangers of the drug yet, but it impressed me that he smoked it. We shared a few innocent kisses but that was all. A few months after I met him, they found Roy in a motel room, slumped in a chair with a needle dangling out of his arm, dead. It seems like he graduated from "grass" to Heroin. He was dead about two hours when they found him. I went to the funeral but couldn't bring myself to go past the front door of the funeral home. My heart was broken for the first time and I mourned for him for a long time after that. Maybe it was just unrequited love, but who knows what love is at that age? Or at any age, for that matter.

One day during the summer, Gloria and I walked to the club but it wasn't open. We sat down on the steps of the house next door and waited. We were talking about finding me a boyfriend since I hadn't seen anyone that I was interested in since Roy, when we both saw a very tall, skinny young man with a shock of curly black hair worn high in a pompadour style walking in our direction. He had on a white shirt, black pegged pants with white pistol pockets. "What about him?" She asked me. I turned and laughed and said something like, "You've got to be kidding. He's a creep." He waited outside the club until it opened and walked in with us. He introduced himself and said his name was Larry. He asked me to dance when they put the first record on the record player. By the time the dance was over, I had a stiff neck because he was over 6 ft. tall. He sat next to me and we spoke about a lot of things into the night. We danced a lot to "Because of You", and "Boulevard of Broken Dreams", by Tony Bennett, who just started his upward rise to fame. After that night, I had a new reason to go to the club besides just getting out of the house, I was in love. Larry would meet me there every night and we would dance. The next three months were heaven, or pretty close to it, but all good things have to come to an end sometime. Larry had enlisted in the Marine Corps and was finally called to report to "Boot Camp", in Parris Island, South Carolina. I was heartbroken, but you can't argue with the United States Government.

After a tearful farewell, he was gone. We exchanged letters on and off and I was a little melancholy for a while.

Three months had gone by very quickly, and as I was leaving school one day, I saw a very tall Marine waiting at the foot of the stairs. It was Larry waiting for me. He was trim

and his hair was very short and I was impressed with his appearance. It definitely was a change for the better. He hugged me tightly and asked to walk me home. I was ecstatic and gladly let him take my books. The girls were all looking at me enviously and I loved it. We talked all the way home, and he was very disciplined and courteous.

Time passed very quickly and Larry got his orders to go to Korea. We bid our tearful good-byes and I promised him that I wouldn't go out with anyone else and would wait for him to come home, it was all so romantic. Seems like I was replaying the old Lana Turner, Clark Gable movies I watched over and over again as a child. Nevertheless, it was love to me.

He left on a cold January day and I settled down to be a stay-at-home. For once I started to get a little more serious about my schoolwork and it was reflected in my grades. My mother saw the change in me but wasn't satisfied with that. After about three months of watching me behaving like a saint, she asked her brother Sammy to talk to me. He came one day while I was doing my homework in the living room and suggested that I go out on dates with the boys that were asking me out. I told him he wasn't my father and to mind his own business. When he became insistent, I told him to go fuck himself. He was very insulted and told my mother what I had said to him. When she angrily confronted me with what I had said, I told her to mind her own business and go fuck herself also. She was in a state of shock because I had never been so disrespectful to her, but after that, she didn't bother me about the topic of Larry or dating.

I waited patiently for Larry, and I wrote to him every day. He was wounded twice and received two Purple Hearts. He sent one to me and I showed it off in school. I knew all the girls were jealous of me and I loved it.



Larry Stayton

The end but not the end of the story...

